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Aesthetics and the Humble Neighborhood Bathhouse: A Perspective on Everyday Sensibility in Japan

美学と近所の小さな大衆浴場：
日本で見られる日常的な感性についての一考察

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1. Introduction

The apprehension and appreciation of the ordinary, mundane things of everyday life is an emerging area of contemporary aesthetics that is being given attention by Japanese scholar, Yuriko Saito, and other scholars¹ of both non-Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. With a moral and ethical bent, this fledgling sub-discipline called *everyday aesthetics* seeks to bring a higher quality to the sensibilities of our daily existence. Moreover, as an attitude and way of life, everyday aesthetics seems to find fertile ground in if not inherent to Japanese culture². Of particular note, everyday aesthetics or the aesthetics of everyday life emerged in Western philosophical circles as a counter to and criticism of what was hitherto an almost entire focus on fine arts as the proper subject matter of aesthetic study, theory and experience (Saito, 2015). As such, everyday aesthetics came into being as a response to the notion of the narrow scope of the prevailing “spectator-oriented” (Saito, 2007) aesthetics and the need for it to be broaden in order to account for the many other sensuous experiences and sensibilities of life and living. Said in another way, an action-oriented (Ibid.) aesthetics has brought inclusiveness and a democratizing spirit to the study, theory and practice of sensuous life, honoring the Deweyan notion that art and life are inseparable (Yuedi and Carter, 2014). Arguably the sensuous life touches all of human actions. This implies that invariably there exists a potential moment of heightened sensibility to the engaged individual even in the everyday, mundane existence.

1 See for example, Thomas Leddy's *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: the Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Broadview Press, 2012.

2 This is a central thesis of my conference presentation titled “Everyday Aesthetics and Mono no Aware: Betwixt and Between” at *4th Annual Conference of the European Network of Japanese Philosophy Übergänge Transitions — 移り渉り Crossing the Boundaries in Japanese Philosophy*, September 5—8, 2018 Universität Hildesheim, Germany.

Following from the above point, it should not be any at all unfathomable, that the traditional custom of communal bathing in Japan—whose culture is known for, especially among Japanophiles, the inter-mixing of sense and sensibility with even the basic, ordinary ways of life and living—has tremendous potential for an appreciative experience. Bathing (*ofuro*), whether at the hot spring (*onsen*) or the public bathhouse (*sentō* / *super-sentō*), is a time-honored and communal custom that is simultaneously caused and occasioned by attitudes and values that are ritualistic, artistic, aesthetic, ordinary, and of a routine, everyday activity (Chambers, 2015, 2016, 2018). In fact, the facility or the structure of a typical *onsen* or *sentō* offers up designs, layouts, wall paintings, and background music that synchronizes with the musical flow of water here and there: a scenery lending itself to both visual and aural motifs. The scenery comes evermore alive with the mannerisms, the observance of written and unwritten rules; as well as the interactions and silence among staff and bathers. A setting that seems more often than not to be ordinarily experienced, yet to the engaged, the social act of *ofuro* together within the setting of a typical *sentō* remains inherently ripe for an aesthetic experience.

This setting essentially, instantiates what social and environmental aesthetics philosopher, Arnold Berleant, calls an *aesthetic field* (Berleant, 2000). With primary influence on the thrust of this paper, Berleant's aesthetic field model focuses on the various elements including the observer / audience and the observed / performer influencing each other through stages of *interaction*, *engagement* and *unity* leading to a moment of heightened sensibility or aesthetic experience. More will be said later in explaining the aesthetic field. Suffice to say, the pivot around which this paper is spun is the social and interactive situation of one of my own ordinary, routine visit to a humble neighborhood *sentō*. The extraordinary that occurred during this visit to my local *sentō* is super-imposed on Berleant's model to offer a critical analysis, as well as to present a further explication of the heightened sensibility I experienced.

However, before describing and analyzing this experience of heightened sensibility, I will first summarize the paper's theoretical underpinnings: Saito's everyday aesthetics and Berleant's aesthetic field.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Yuriko Saito's Everyday Aesthetics and Arnold Berleant's Aesthetic Field

Saito's theory of everyday aesthetics and its inherence in Japanese way of life turns on the notion of moral judgments. Moral virtues such as care, civility, gentleness, manners, and respect are inextricably linked to the Japanese aesthetic sensibility (2005, 2007a, 2007b). In giving a wide range of examples of her Japanese culture's aesthetic sensibilities and in devoting an entire

chapter (2007a) and a journal article (2007b) Saito has been persuasive in demonstrating the inseparability between the everyday and moral aesthetics in Japan. Among the examples of everyday aesthetic sensibilities and the moral virtues that undergird them include the classic Japanese tea ceremony, which both evokes and invokes the precept: one time, one meeting or *ichigo-ichie*³. Gift-giving in Japanese everyday life is yet another case, which exemplifies care and thoughtfulness by the giver regarding its wrapping and the receiver who, when opening the gift, would make effort in “...keeping the wrapping paper in a hypothetically reusable condition before admiring the gift” (2017: 185)⁴. There are other aspects of Japanese everyday life including the values of hospitality or *omotenashi* and considerateness or *omoiyari*, which are integral to everyday aesthetic attitude, and that would no doubt lend strong support to Saito’s theory.

For Berleant, one of his main tasks as a social philosopher has been to address certain inadequacies that had existed in aesthetic theory. Central to these shortcomings is the (ill-) treatment that has meted out to the *arts* because of a traditional adherence to an *a priori*, cognitive, and distancing attitude to the aesthetic experience. This approach fails to ground its theory in the empirical or the experiential, which is the sustenance, and life-blood of any aesthetic experience. Aesthetic value, the precondition of any theory of aesthetic experience, Berleant argues, calls for a situational analysis of the context within which the experience occurs. Any such explication of the context or situational analysis must however begin with yet another definitional challenge, namely, what art is. Noting the many definitions that have been proposed, Berleant accepts their import but then also points out their inadequacy to providing a fuller understanding of what art is especially in its contemporary and non-exclusive forms.⁵ Art is, he argues, “...the total situation in which the objects, activities, and experiences of art occur, a setting which includes all these denotata and more” (2000:50). The entire setting, the context, or the situation, includes everything, those perceived and not perceived by the observer or participant. The *aesthetic field* is what Berleant calls this potential appreciative situation of interdependent elements; it is “...the context in which art objects are actively and creatively experienced as valuable. It is this inclusive setting which we must examine in its entirety before we can give an accurate

3 For a good definition and the aesthetic import of the Japanese concept *ichigo ichie*, see especially the online article on *Tea ceremony: Ichigo ichie, wabi, and yugen* at <https://sites.google.com/site/japan12underbakke/philosophies-of-wellness/tea-ceremony-ichigo-ichie>

4 Saito is quoting Yasutaka Sai, *The Eight Core Values of Japanese Businessman: Toward an Understanding of Japanese Management*, 1995, p. 57.

5 In *The Aesthetic Field* (2000) Berleant notes what art is as defined by others: “...experiencing things aesthetically, either as intuitive expression with Croce, as intrinsic perception with Gotshalk, as an integral experience with Dewey, or as pleasure with Ducasse.” Ibid. p. 50.

explanation of what art is and answer the questions which continue to plague aesthetic theory” (Ibid.).

In considering the three broad interim concepts and processes: *transaction*, *engagement*, and *unity*, I should first state a caveat. Berleant’s theorized the aesthetic field in his 1970 publication, the first edition⁶, with a focus on the art object, its entire situation and the creative interplay of all the factors including artists and observers. Since then he has expanded the theory stressing

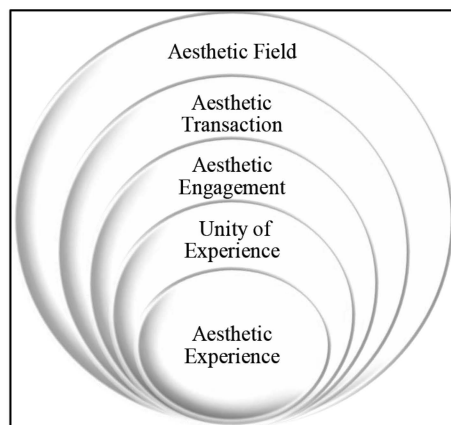


Figure1: From Aesthetic Field to Aesthetic Experience

concepts such as *aesthetic engagement*, *aesthetic sensibility*, and *social aesthetics* to account for the broad spectrum of sensible, human experience. To begin with, the concept of the aesthetic field explains the structure of an aesthetic experience. As such, it gives more an account of the analytical rather than experiential. Again, the aesthetic field includes everything present when the experience occurs: observed and unobserved. Moreover, it includes biological, social, cultural, psychological, historical, and technological factors that are influencing everything in the aesthetic field. Extrapolating from

and super-imposing on this theory, a conversation or an observation whether in the public or private sphere would include all those factors just mentioned plus the knowledge and cognition of the people involved. Berleant notes the observer or the appreciator and all the factors acting together suggest a wide degree of variability that might seem to complicate the theory’s explanatory success. However, “it is the differences in these variable factors that account for differences in aesthetic response and judgment”, he argues (2000: 82-83). As for *aesthetic transaction*, Berleant is simply pointing to the relations or creative interplay among all the elements involved in the field. While, what he calls *engagement* refers to “...an active process that integrates sensible data with discriminating intelligence...” (2013:3) or a “ ...complete absorption in perceptual experience that has temporal depth conjoined with the resonance of memory and meaning... (2010:222)”. In *Aesthetics and Environment*, Berleant expresses forcefully the notion of ‘absorption’ and in so doing shows its contradistinction to the Kantian, dualistic, and disinterested approach to aesthetic theory (2005:87). Total absorption or ‘being caught up’ in the moment is ‘an experience’ in the Deweyan sense and antithetical to the Kantian distancing, sequestered and contemplative attitude to the appreciative experience.

6 The second edition of *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetics Experience* is published by Cybereditions, 2000

The *unity of experience* that precedes the *aesthetic experience*, therefore, points to a disappearance of the boundaries of self, a harmony with the situation, an assimilation, a continuity (168), indeed, a vulnerability. Accordingly, aesthetic experience for Berleant is the “...time [s] of sensory acuteness, of perceptual unity of nature and human, of a continuity of awareness, understanding, and involvement mixed with awe and humility, in which the focus is on the immediacy and directness of the occasion of experience” (1992: 169–170).

This sense of community, sense of shared space, ‘awe and humility’ as well as the ‘vulnerability’ of self, ‘sensory acuteness’ and ‘perceptual unity’ that are characteristics of an aesthetic experience is poignantly expressed by an engaged bather:

Between long soaks in the hot water, I would go on quietly about my business of washing my hair and body as other ladies, both younger and older, would also scrub their bodies and busy themselves. Sometimes I was right next to somebody, and other times I found myself all alone, lost in a world of my dreams. I remember suddenly coming out of my own thoughts one time to realize how everyone was scrubbing his or her body with such intense seriousness, and I liked that. I liked all of us sharing that moment of cleansing and the sense of belonging and comfortable acceptance we had for each other without ever having to say anything about it. With all of us naked and bathing together, there was a sense that we were, after all, just humans—all trying to live as well as we could. I remember one evening covertly watching a middle-aged woman clean and wash her face that had been covered with heavy makeup. When I finally saw her face cleaned and scrubbed, suddenly I felt like telling her that it was beautiful, that she didn’t need to cover it. (Bruce Smith et al., 2001:87)

In the mode of a descriptive aesthetics and along with an adaptation of Berleant’s aesthetic field framework, I will turn to recounting one of my own appreciative experiences—an experience of an ordinary individual, though admittedly with a deep interest in Japanese aesthetic culture.

3. Cleopatra Public Bathhouse Conversational Encounter

Ofuro at a *sento* is a traditional custom involving naked bathing in the presence of others at public bathhouses, indoor and outdoor separated by sex. Following certain rules of manner and order of actions which are mindful of other bathers while sharing a social space, this ritual-like act involves cleansing one’s body before soaking in steaming, hot water; sometimes sweating it out inside a sauna side by side with strangers; sometimes in silence; sometimes exchanging

7 My conference presentation on *Communal Public Bath and Bathhouses in Japan: Theorizing the Aesthetics of an Everyday Experience* (2015) stresses this point.

smiles⁷. I have been a regular, weekly ‘ritualist’ of this practice for about six years now; moreover, not unlike the classic participant observer, I have also given academic treatment to this topic in two conference presentations⁸. Thus, I have had countless experiences of this time-honored Japanese way and art of cleansing the body, and agreeably some say, the soul.

The extraordinary that I ‘experienced’ during one ordinary visit to my local super-sento stemmed from a conversation I had with a fellow bather whom I have bumped into there from time to time. Our conversation during those times include banter-like topics such as work, the weather, and the number of visits to the bathhouse so far during that week. Talking points also included the time of entrance to and intended time of leaving the bathhouse, and if we meet in the dry sauna room (my favorite place), usually something is said about our heat endurance time for that occasion. Since my Japanese skills are shamefully quite basic and his English skills appear non-existent, the Japanese conversations were usually short and surface-level. However, the more we met the more we were able to understand each other: we overcame the language barrier by sticking to simple topics and rehashing old topic points. Rather than developing a ‘meaningful’ and long term relationship, the primary purposes of our exchanges on the occasions we have met were, conversation for the sake of conversation, acknowledgement of each other’s presence, and as a strategic distraction from the scorching heat inside the sauna—a task perfectly done by the installed TV—and at times in the steaming water. I should add that, my preferred mode of operation at the bathhouse is silence. Thus, a few times, admittedly, I have felt a bit annoyed talking to him, especially on those occasions when he had asked questions which I had answered before. What then was the exchange that occasioned a unique and perceptive engagement leading to an intense experience? The conversation occurred one routine evening when exited the sauna room and bumped into him. He appeared to have just got out of the main steaming, nutrient-filled soaking water, the prime spot and therefore the most crowded area in this bathhouse, which is incidentally named *Cleopatra*, presumably after the famous Egyptian Pharaoh. I describe what followed below.

When our eyes made contact, as is the norm, we acknowledged each other with customary smiles. This time, however, as we got within inches apart, and was now facing each other, he uttered what was a shocking evaluation of the state of part of my body: “Saikin onaka ga ooki desu ne!” (“Recently, your stomach has gotten big, is it not so?”) Though his observation / evaluation was bang on, because I thought commenting on someone else’s body was such a taboo topic, it came as a surprise. Surprised but not embarrassed by the comment, I could still reply quickly, as though I had been prepared for it. The fact-based explanation I gave was that I

8 See previous and # 2 notes.

had not been able to participate regularly in my club's soccer games recently due to the worsening of my 'bad' knee condition, which incidentally is one of the primary reasons I have become a public bathhouse and hot springs lover ('mania' in Japanese parlance). Whether he understood the reason I gave for my growing stomach and / or found it incredulous, I cannot say for sure. Alternatively, it could be that he read my surprise or discomfiture. Yet still, he may have caught up with himself of having broached a no-no topic or crossed a red line. As mentioned, yes I was astonished by and felt a bit awkward hearing his comment, but not in any way felt harassed, angry or violated. Therefore, when I gave what was a logical if not the prime reason for my approaching 'beer-belly', I did not anticipate his response. "Ne nihon no ryori oishi desu ne. Dakara, shouganai. Daijyobu desu ne!" (You see, Japanese food is so delicious that it cannot be helped that your stomach has become big. So don't mind; it's OK!) His offering this reason was both hilarious and unexpected; all I could do was to chuckle a laugh while heading to do what I had intended: to ritually immersed my body (and soul) into the cold water strategically place just outside the sauna.

4. Analysis: Super-imposing on the Aesthetic Field Model

Using Berleant's model of the aesthetic field as diagrammatized in figure 2 reflects my own interpretation; hence, I described it as a super-imposing act. The purpose lends only to analytical and explicatory attempts and must therefore not be confused with the actual experience. The

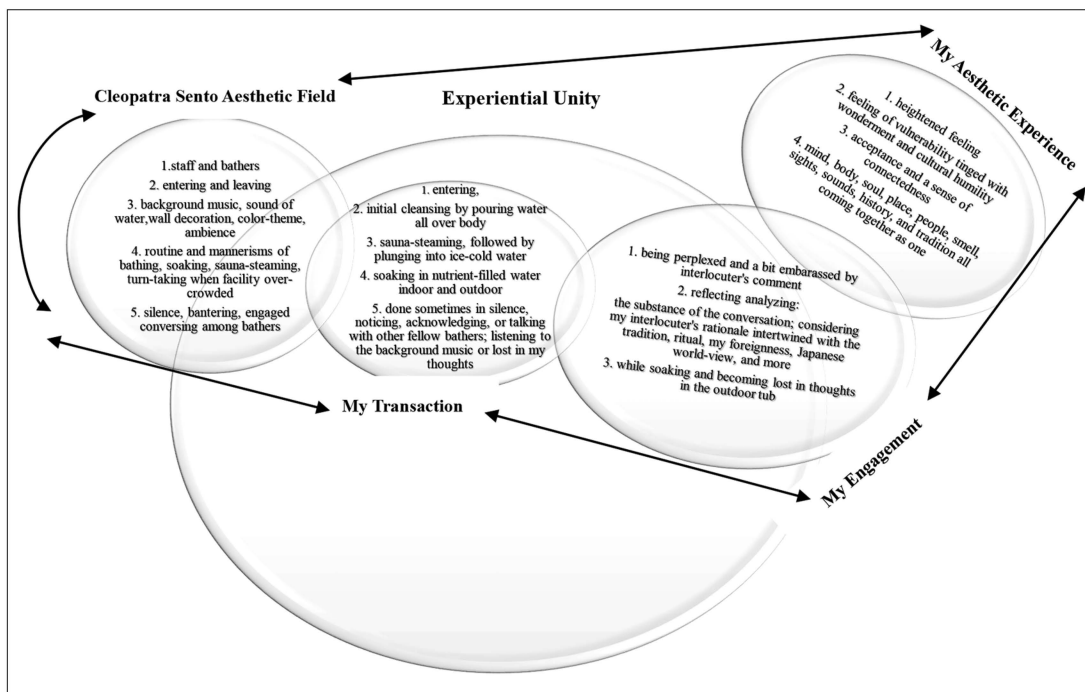


Figure 2: From Aesthetic Field to Aesthetic Experience: Analysis of My Aesthetic Experience

aesthetic appreciation and sensibilities which characterize this account of one of my routine visits to my local *sento*, not unlike other aesthetic experiences, had a certain immediacy, perceptual awareness and a unity of experience that invariably and essentially remain personal. Yet, within the economy of this paper, I should say something more, which I hope will give some clarity to the diagram (figure 2).

As can be gleaned from figure 2 *my engagement* which preceded *my aesthetic experience* essentially began nearing the ending of the one-minute conversation with my fellow bather or interlocutor. Though being perplexed and a little embarrassed by my interlocutor's comment about my burgeoning stomach, I think I was able to keep my composure. However, my interlocutor might have observed some semblance of discomfiture in my body language and rightfully felt responsible. His reasoning that even if I may feel unhappy with my growing belly, it is the Japanese delicious (and reputed healthy) cuisine that is responsible. Thus, I need not worry. The surface-level as well as the deeper meanings that could be unpacked from his rationale particularly arrested my mind for a while. This is what Berleant would consider 'total absorption' or being 'caught up in the moment', as well as, interpreting and making meaning of the scene, the social situation, or the observed. Moreover, in this particular experience, the setting of a Japanese public bathhouse, the culture (including tradition, customs, rituals, values, norms, and mores), our (fellow bather and me) knowledge, relative perceptual acuity, and much more are all at play influencing the situation. Eventually, experiential unity arrived bringing with it heightened awareness, clarity and connectedness. I should add ending this short explanation of *figure 2*: since this was my own *aesthetic experience*, which remains very personal, there are inherent constraints to providing a sufficiently clear and possibly relatable account.

To conclude this rather brief account of my *aesthetic experience* and its super-imposition on Berleant's *aesthetic field* model, I repeat that the trigger was the conversation. The conversation I had with my fellow bather that triggered the experience, took less than a minute. That minute of exchange later stemmed bemusement, cultural confusion, and contemplation: going over what had transpired and considering the place, the occasion, the custom, all the ritual, my own foreignness and the 'Japanese-ness' of both what we fellow bathers were engaged in and my interlocutor's rationale. My reflection continued while I soaked leisurely in an outdoor tub (*rotenburo*) of rather lukewarm and quietly welcoming water. An intense moment of clarity and sensory perception arrived: as usual a fleeting moment, yet it enveloped me, arresting both mind and body such that I lost track of time and place. Though the encounter occurred over a year contemporaneous to writing this essay, its intensity was such that it has remained as lucid as it was then, occasioning my now relating it as 'an experience' set apart from the routine visit I

made that evening to *Cleopatra*, my local public bathhouse.

5. Concluding comments

This paper focused on the potential to the engaged for experiencing aesthetic sensibility in everyday life. A topic which I have given some academic treatment recently especially in regards to conference presentations and discussions, my approach to aesthetic sensibilities and everyday life is primary influenced by social and aesthetic philosophers Arnold Berleant and Yuriko Saito. Using Berleant's *aesthetic field* model, the paper attempted a brief analysis of one of my own extraordinary social encounters that occurred during a routine visit to my local bathhouse. The heightened sensibility that characterized this encounter was influenced by my engaged presence as much as the context of a Japanese bathhouse, the *sento*. As stated earlier, typical sento's designs, layouts, wall paintings, and background music that synchronizes with the musical flow of water here and there presents a scenery that lend itself to both visual and aural motifs. This scenery comes evermore alive with the mannerisms, the observance of written and unwritten rules, as well as, the interactions and even the silence among staff and bathers. Admittedly, this humble neighborhood bathhouse is a setting and a social act that seem more often than not to be ordinarily experienced. Yet to the engaged, this essay contends, the social act of *ofuro* together within the setting of a typical sento remains inherently ripe for an aesthetic experience. Equally true but underexplored in this paper is the notion that the aesthetic appears to be seamlessly interwoven in even the very ordinary, daily activities of life in Japan. This notion along with its moral and ethical import is at the crux of Saito's theory on everyday aesthetics. Exploring this topic in writing remains a future challenge for me.

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【Abstract】

美学と近所の小さな大衆浴場：
日本で見られる日常的な感性についての一考察

チェインバーズ, ガルシア

日本における社会共同体的な大衆入浴に対する多面的な性格やその風習については、さまざまな視点から分析してみる必要があろう。この風習は、儀式的、伝統的、芸術的、美的であると同時に、日常的でありふれた体験ともなっている。

本論は、古くから行われている身体的な清めの行為だけでなく魂を強化すると思われてきた単純行為としての大衆入浴が、「美的体験」を引き起こすことを論じるものである。言い換えると、日本の大衆入浴を形作る要素の中には、描写と言説を行うに値する美的価値が存在している。

この美的価値は大衆入浴の相対的な状況や環境に内在している。つまり、全体の配置、意匠、雰囲気、入浴時のルール、用意されている温熱療法、スタッフや入浴者の気配りや思いやりのある行動といったものが、等しく一種の「美的処理」を担っている。

本論では、アーノルド・ベルリアンによる叙述的美学の実践を借用し、先ず大衆浴場（銭湯）における著者自身の観察的体験を提示し、次いで、ベルリアンの「美的フィールド」の枠組みに重ね合わせた分析を行う。

本論の大まかな理論的な要旨については、冒頭で強調している現代的美学の下位区分として起こりつつある「日常的美学」にその多くを負っている。